

A Bit About Buttons

By ReadWorks



Buttons seem to be everywhere: on our shirts, the remote control, our jackets and our phones. (Okay, not so many on the phone anymore!) They can be round or square or spider-shaped, made of wood or plastic, have stickers on them or numbers, but we see them wherever we look. Where did they come from? What were they first made for?

Push and Fasten

Let's examine the history of the word first. "Button" comes from the French verb *bouter* which means "to push." But the first time a button was actually pushed through a buttonhole was in the 13th century. The earliest buttons were made of animal parts: bones, horns and leather. The most common use of buttons is as fasteners in clothing. They hold two pieces of fabric together. But their first uses were as decoration on clothes and jewelry.

Archaeologists (people who study the past by recovering things like fossil remains and monuments) have found buttons from many ancient civilizations. The Indus Valley people used them, as did the ancient Egyptians and the ancient Chinese.

Useless?

“Even the simplest things had a glorious pointlessness to them. When buttons came in [...] people couldn't get enough of them, and arrayed them in decorative profusion on the backs and collars and sleeves of coats, where they didn't actually do anything. One relic of this is the short row of pointless buttons that are still placed on the underside of jacket sleeves near the cuff. These have been purely decorative and have never had a purpose...”

- Bill Bryson (historian and writer of *At Home: A Short History of Private Life*)

Buttons aren't exactly pointless, even if in some cases they just serve a decorative purpose. Do this quick exercise: count the number of buttons on a man's (suit) jacket—front, pockets, sleeves and the rest of the jacket. They were placed there not because of their functionality, but because someone, centuries ago, thought they looked good. Hundreds of years later, they are still with us.

“Pearly King of Somers Town”

Our friend Bryson might not think too highly of buttons, but some people have taken them very seriously. One such man was a street sweeper in London called Henry Croft. He would wear suits with thousands of white pearly buttons to attract attention towards the cause of local hospitals. He started a tradition of men and women wearing suits and dresses decorated with mother of pearl buttons. These people became known as “Pearly Kings and Queens.” Even today, Pearly Kings and Queens continue to wear pearly clothing and collect funds for charity.

Fun Facts about Buttons

- Did you know that the word button is a relative of the verb “to butt,” which also means “to push”?
- Button collecting is a very popular hobby. The National Button Society was formed in 1939 in Chicago. It has more than 3,000 members!
- Till the 18th century, buttons were very expensive. Only the rich could wear them, and they were a status symbol.

- Special metal buttons were used to hide compasses during the World Wars.
- The Waterbury Button Museum in Waterbury, Connecticut and The Button Room in Gurnee, Illinois have large collections of buttons. The “button room” was an actual room in Elizabeth Hewitt’s house in Gurnee, where she loved telling stories about her collection of buttons.

Name: _____ Date: _____

1. What is one thing that buttons are used for?

- A** building monuments
- B** pushing people out of the way
- C** sweeping streets
- D** decoration

2. What does the author include a list of in this passage?

- A** The author includes a list of the kings and queens of England.
- B** The author includes a list of the ways ancient Egyptians used buttons.
- C** The author includes a list of fun facts about buttons.
- D** The author includes a list of different kinds of phones.

3. Some buttons are pointless.

What evidence from the passage supports this statement?

- A** Special metal buttons were used to hide compasses during the World Wars.
- B** "Pearly Kings and Queens" collects money for charity through the wearing of pearly suits.
- C** Buttons on the underside of jacket sleeves near the cuff are purely decorative and have never had a functional purpose.
- D** Buttons can be round, square, spider-shaped, wooden, plastic, and come with numbers or stickers on them.

4. What is an example of a button that has a purpose?

- A** a button on a remote control that turns on the television when it is pressed
- B** a button on the underside of a jacket sleeve near the cuff
- C** a button that costs a lot of money and appeared on a coat collar in the 18th century
- D** a round button made out of wood

5. What is this passage mainly about?

- A plastic
- B buttons
- C archaeology
- D London

6. Read the following sentence: "Buttons aren't exactly **pointless**, even if in some cases they just serve a decorative purpose."

What does the word **pointless** mean?

- A without any use
- B too long
- C not safe for children
- D very cold

7. Choose the answer that best completes the sentence below.

Some buttons have no purpose; _____, other buttons do.

- A specifically
- B first
- C previously
- D however

8. What were the first uses of buttons?

9. What is the most common use of buttons?

10. Are buttons pointless? Explain why or why not, using evidence from the passage.
